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Spirituality and Social Justice: A Dialogue Two monks from different traditions, JMS 2012 presenter, Frei Betto, and Dada Maheshananda discuss social issues from a spiritual perspective.

Frei Betto is one of the major voices for social justice in Latin America. A Dominican friar from Brazil, he has been a political prisoner and lived as an activist with the poorest of the poor. He is the author of 34 books, some of which have become bestsellers in Brazil and other countries of South America. He has been chosen Intellectual of the Year by the Brazilian Writers Union and won the national literary Jabuti Award. This dialogue with Dada Maheshananda, a yoga monk, was held in the Dominican Seminary in Sao Paulo.

DADA: Your role in the Catholic Church is a bit unusual. You trained as a priest, but decided not to take the vows and have instead remained as a friar, a monk. What is your perspective about your role?

FREI BETTO: I think that my role is to help people awaken to a holistic spirituality that does not separate the body from the spirit, a kind of political spirituality. I also like to work with cultural groups and to write. What about you? Are you celibate or can you marry?

DADA: Our monks and nuns are also celibate, and they are equal. Our members however have families. I think that our role as monks was described well by the Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Merton: the monk lives in society but is not part of society.

FREI BETTO: I like the works of Thomas Merton a lot, too.

DADA: I believe this is our role, to point the way to a new future that guarantees the welfare and happiness of all. Humanity needs this because materialism and capitalism are very strong today. Advertising has become like a religion that bombards our senses. So we must speak against this materialism that permits, for example, amoral advertisements that encourage young people to smoke. What is spirituality for you?

FREI BETTO: My spirituality is centred on the example of Jesus. I am impassioned by his testimony and example. But I also feel spiritually enriched with other contributions, especially that of Buddhism. I think that the Catholic Church is very poor in respect to meditation for

reasons that I am still studying. It has severely persecuted its mystics throughout history. For me, spirituality is the language of the future. I give a lot of time to this, because I don't believe that humanity will find a new path without diving deeply in spirituality. In other words, what people are searching for is very close to them, but they don't know it.

[On another occasion, Frei Betto said: God is not something which is outside us. God lives in the center of our hearts. As Saint Augustine said, "God is more intimate to us than we ourselves." And every experience of love is, on one hand, a manifestation of the presence of God in us and, on the other hand, the possibility of knowing in a real way this presence. For this our experience of love is insatiable. And it is always a discovery, to prove a little that which is infinite, a mystery to be unravelled. Love is always an enigma. As Galileo replied to the princes of Florence, "God is in people's hearts or nowhere!"]

DADA: The tradition of yoga would agree with this. We accept a definition common in most dictionaries that the Supreme Consciousness is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. If He knows everything, and if He is loving by nature, then He knows what is appropriate for every one of us. To ask for something in prayer then is not only unnecessary, but in some way arrogant. The purpose of meditation is to feel that divine presence, that inspiration in silence, not to pray for something particular.

FREI BETTO: Jesus proposes that we have a relation with God that is very close and familiar. I agree that to ask and receive is a preliminary step of prayer. The deeper dimension is when we take the shelter of silence, as Jesus did when he spent the entire night in profound silence. This is deeper, mystical prayer.

DADA: You were imprisoned by the military dictatorship in 1969 for helping to smuggle ten people out of Brazil who you described as "swimming against the current". You then spent more than three years in various maximum security prisons. One of the books you wrote about that period was translated and published in English [*Against Principalities and Powers: Letters from a Brazilian Jail*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 241 pp., 1977, and published a year later in London by Lutterworth as *Letters from a Prisoner of Conscience*.] What lessons did you learn from that very hard experience?

FREI BETTO: Prison for me was a very profound retreat, a very deep experience. I don't want anyone to have to experience what I did, but having gone through it and having come out OK, I can see its other side. It turned my head around, it radically changed my vision of things. It was a very deep encounter with my own self, and therefore with God. Because if you come to know yourself better, you find another who is not yourself, that is in fact your true identity. So prison for me was a journey into my own self. DADA: What is your experience with meditation?

FREI BETTO: Meditation is something essential for me. When I meditate, I feel myself vulnerable to the Holy Spirit, more sensitive to the will of God. When I don't meditate, it is as if I have closed the channels, and I fall into rationalisation. I feel spiritually heavy, opaque, not light and transparent. Meditation is the source of life, of revitalisation. I would like to meditate more, but the telephone attacks me. When I am away from here, then it is possible. I feel that this is an enormous shortcoming, because for me, meditation is fundamental.

DADA: Some people believe that spirituality should avoid the questions of social injustice and economic poverty. What is your response to this?

FREI BETTO: I disagree absolutely. Spirituality is not for the satisfaction of my ego. Spirituality gives one the capacity to love others more, especially those who are most needy. Jesus identified himself with the poorest people, so I believe that it is fundamental for spiritualists to see in the poor, in the oppressed, the true presence of God. For my spiritual liberation, for my realisation, it is necessary that I love those around me. Subjectively I cannot judge anyone, but objectively I find no value in a spirituality that does not rise to the liberation of the oppressed. I believe in a spirituality that returns to make the entire world a place of harmony and fraternity. And this means a fight against injustice.

DADA: What is your opinion about liberation theology, which combined a Marxist analysis of class exploitation with a radical Catholic faith? You were one of its pioneers.

FREI BETTO: No, one of its disciples. I think that liberation theology is passing through a crisis of creativity. A certain form of it has penetrated in the life of the Catholic Church. The documents of the bishops about social injustice in Brazil, their criticism of the sale of the national Brazilian mining company Vale do Rio Doce and of neo-liberalism, are the healthy fruits of liberation theology.

[Ex-priest] Leonardo Boff was working with me on some new themes such as holistic, quantum physics. His book Ecology: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor launches some of these new ideas. But the Vatican is exerting strong pressure to inhibit Catholic publishers from printing works of liberation theology. So Boff has switched to Atica, a private publisher. This difficulty is causing liberation theology to pass from an era of productive creativity to an ebb.

DADA: Do you think that this pressure from the Vatican will change, that it's a flow?

FREI BETTO: Yes, it is really a flow that depends on various factors. For example who will be the next Pope and who will be the next Cardinal of Sao Paulo influence this. Sao Paulo has always been a space of creativity due to the protection and encouragement of Cardinal Arns who has just retired. Rio de Janeiro on the other hand is not, due to the conservative cardinal there. I feel it is very difficult to discuss theology in Latin America separately from liberation theology, because its ideas are very widespread among the Christian base communities at the grassroots level.

DADA: You have written several books about the Cuban society. Your most famous work on this topic is Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto [Simon and Schuster, 1987, translated and published in more than thirty countries, with more than two million copies sold worldwide]. It was the first and only time that a Communist leader has spoken publically about religion. What is your opinion about his government now?

FREI BETTO: I consider Cuba in advance of the rest of Latin America, for the simple fact that the social indices are much higher there. So my evaluation of a country is not, for example, how often the president changes, but rather the percentage of the population that has the right to life. This is why I admire Cuba, while at the same time that I have a lot of criticism of it, too. I see various defects in the Cuban Revolution, but the social successes are most important.

I live in Brazil with great poverty and suffering in the streets, but I do not see that in Cuba. There are difficulties there, but they are not structural, they are because of the US economic blockade and the end of the Soviet Union that sustained Cuba. The Cubans are heroically maintaining and following their project. I will not talk about socialism, but of the share of

essential goods. The basic necessities are essentially guaranteed. Education, food and health care are fundamental. Now how can they resist the blockade, globalisation and neo-liberalism, I don't know how to respond. But strangely, despite all the difficulties, they continue to resist and struggle, and this is a very important factor.

DADA: And Fidel Castro's historic encounter with the Pope last year?

FREI BETTO: I think that it will be a positive event. It will certainly irritate many Cubans in Miami, because it is a form of religious legitimation of the revolution. DADA: What projects are you working on now?

FREI BETTO: As long as I am alive I write. It is fundamental to me, like breathing. My father was a judge and a journalist and my mother has written several cookbooks, so literature seems to run in our family. I have various writing projects, but right now I am completing a historical romance about Jesus. . Recently I returned from Palestine where I visited Galilee, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I completed research about the environment and day-to-day life there.

DADA: Today the level of injustice in the world is rising. Do you have hope that this will change? FREI BETTO: I see the world in an extremely critical situation. We are passing through very precarious times, but I don't lose hope. And I want to die helping to plant the seed of a different future. You believe in this also, because I feel this in the book Proutist Economics which I read. You have a preoccupation with the social, the political. This is a revelation for me, it is very important.

DADA: You visited the Philippines recently, where I worked for eight years. Did you like it?

FREI BETTO: The Filipino people are very good. Even the children speak English. I envy them because I am poor in English. I once lived for three months in England, but it was not sufficient. I am unable to enroll in a course because I constantly travel and speak to prayer groups throughout Brazil.

DADA: What is your opinion about the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*)?

FREI BETTO: I think that it is a very good path. They have succeeded in mobilising Brazilian society through their large camps of activists pressing for land reform and to occupy large unutilized plantations. I have just written an article about them. Because of them, poverty has not grown higher because fifteen million people are staying in their camps. Were it not the landless movement in this country, those people would be living in the slums of our cities with their children on the streets.

DADA: Proutist Economics offers another solution to the problem of rural exodus and urbanisation. It suggests that agricultural cooperatives be started along with agro- and agrico-industries. These will create jobs in impoverished rural areas to attract people back to the countryside.

FREI BETTO: I think this is very important.

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